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ABSTRACT

The replies to a survey of more than 1,000 undergraduates concerning childhood sexual encounters are reported. Linear structural equation modeling is employed to analyze which characteristics of the sexual encounters with other children were associated with more positive or negative responses by the subjects. Approximately 42% of the subjects reported a childhood sexual encounter with another child. Most encounters involved sexual kissing or exposing of genitalia, and they generally occurred with a friend. High levels of coercion from the other child to gain the subject's cooperation, homosexual encounters, and encounters with those other than friends resulted in a more negative response. The type of sexual activity was not associated with response. Subjects who experienced a high level of coercion reacted to their sexual encounter similarly to other subjects who had a sexual encounter with an adult, while those who experienced low levels of coercion rated their encounter with a child more positively. Implications for future research are discussed. (Author)

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Characteristics affecting children's responses to childhood sexual encounters with other children

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April, 1987

Abstract

The replies to a survey of more than 1000 undergraduates concerning childhood sexual encounters are reported. Linear structural equation modeling is employed to analyze which characteristics of the sexual encounters with other children were associated with more positive or negative responses by the subjects. Approximately 42% of the subjects reported a childhood sexual encounter with another child. Most encounters involved sexual kissing or exposing of genitalia, and they generally occurred with a friend. High levels of coercion from the other child to gain the subject's cooperation, homosexual encounters, and encounters with those other than friends resulted in a more negative response. The type of sexual activity was not associated with response. Subjects who experienced a high level of coercion reacted to their sexual encounter similarly to other subjects who had a sexual encounter with an adult, while those who experienced low levels of coercion rated their encounter with a child more positively. Implications for future research are discussed.

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There has been a recent explosion of interest in the consequences to children of sexual encounters with an adult. While some of these encounters appear to have positive or neutral consequences (see Haugaard & Reppucci, 1986) the general opinion among researchers and clinicians is that most of the encounters cause negative consequences for the children (see Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Some researchers have examined the prevalence and consequences of sexual encounters between siblings. Many of these encounters appear to involve sexual curiosity and mutual exploration. Those in which one sibling coerces the other into sexual activity, however, have been shown to have some negative consequences to the coerced sibling, and have been labeled by some as "sibling abuse" (Finkelhor, 1980; Laredo, 1982).

There is little recent information in the literature on sexual encounters between children. Most of the "current" knowledge about this area of children's development comes from the old studies by Kinsey and his colleagues (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). More recent studies often involve a reanalysis of the original Kinsey data (e.g., Van Wyk, 1984). There appears to be no information on the prevalence or consequences of sexually abusive encounters between children. This may be due to the belief that sexual encounters between children are mutually initiated and essentially positive or neutral learning experiences for those involved. The possibility remains, however, that some of these encounters will be viewed as negative by one of the children, and that the negative experience may have an adverse effect on the course of the child's development. Of special concern might be experiences in which one child is coerced to participate by another. Studies of sexual encounters between adults and children indicate that one of the few factors consistently associated with negative outcome for the child is a high level of coercion by the adult (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Haugaard & Reppucci, 1986).

A clearer understanding of the prevalence and consequences of sexual encounters between children should be of interest to those concerned about children's development--from psychological researchers to parents. If certain types of childhood sexual encounters tend to have a negative impact on a child's development, it may be important that some type of action can be taken to mollify any possible negative effects. If childhood sexual encounters that are viewed as negative by children do not have any long-lasting consequences, this information will be useful to calm any fears of parents or other adults when a child has such a negative experience.

In this study, retrospective reports of their childhood sexual encounters were gathered from more than 1000 undergraduates (a childhood sexual encounter is defined as one occurring while the subject is less than 13 and the other child is 15 years or younger). These encounters are described and the effects of various characteristics of the encounter on the child's response are examined using linear structural equation modeling. The effects of coercion are further analyzed by comparing subjects who reported a coercive sexual encounter with another child to other subjects who reported a sexual encounter with an adult.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 1784 male and female undergraduates in natural and social science classes at a university in a mid-Atlantic state. Average age of the subjects was 19.2 years; 61% were female, 39% were male. Ninety-nine percent of the subjects were single. Eighty-nine percent of the subjects were white, 6% were black, 4% were Asian, and 1% were of other races. Most of the studezf~ came from an upper-middle class economic background.

Procedure

Anonymous questionnaires were distributed to all students in six large lecture classes and were completed outside of class. The questionnaire was divided into several sections: demographic questions, questions about current social and sexual relationships, and questions about childhood sexual encounters with other children and with adults. Specific questions were asked about each sexual encounter and about the subject's reactions to the experience. If the subject had more than one encounter with another child or an adult, they were asked to describe the one in each category that was the most meaningful to them. Sixty-one percent (1089) of the questionnaires were returned.

Analysis

Initial analysis involved the comparison of demographic information of those who had and had not had a childhood sexual encounter with another child. Next, the types of sexual encounters of those who reported them were examined, and the experiences of boys and girls were contrasted. In order to determine which characteristics of the childhood sexual encounter affected the subjects' reactions to the experience, the reactions were analyzed by linear structural equation models, specified using the RAM procedure (McArdle & Horn, 1986), and fit using the LISREL 5 computer program. Finally, the responses to their sexual encounter of subjects who experienced high levels of coercion by another child (who rated the coercion a 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale [1=no pressure, 7=extreme pressure]), and a random sample of those not experiencing high levels of coercion by another child, were compared with the responses of other subjects who, while a child, had had a sexual encounter with an adult using MANOVA. In this portion of the analysis, children who had both an encounter with another child and an adult were excluded.

Results

Descriptions of sexual encounters. Forty-two percent of the subjects reported a sexual encounter with another child before they turned 13 and the other child turned 16. As can be seen from Table 1, there were few demographic differences between those who had and had not had a sexual encounter. The differences that were significant were small. More males had had an encounter. Those with a sexual encounter rated the strength of religion in their childhood family as slightly lower, had more friends as a child, and were more likely to have had a friend they could confide in.

Insert Table 1 about here

The characteristics of the sexual encounters for girls and boys are detailed in Table 2. As can be seen, most of the encounters involved either sexual hugging

and kissing or one or both of the children exposing themselves to the other. Oral or genital intercourse occurred infrequently. Nearly half of the encounters involved only one sexual encounter, and a great majority were with friends.

There were a few significant differences between the experiences of the girls and boys. Boys reported fewer instances of exhibition and more of some sort of intercourse. Boys recalled encounters in which they were older and in which there was less of an age difference between them and the other child. Girls engaged in more homosexual encounters, and initiated the sexual encounter less often than the boys.

Insert Table 2 about here

Effects of sexual encounter characteristics. Linear structural modeling (LSM) was employed to determine which characteristics of the sexual encounter could be used to predict the response of the 455 subjects who reported a childhood sexual encounter. LSM tests hypotheses about the structure of a set of data by minimizing the errors of predictions of correlations between a specified group of variables in the data. As can be seen in Figure 1, there are four pieces of information that can be used to specify a model (using RAM notation) (a) one-headed arrows, or predictors, which are regressions of one variable on another, (b) two-headed arrows, or spans, which indicate correlations when drawn between two variables, or unique variance when drawn from one variable to itself, (c) squares, which indicate manifest, or observed variables, and (d) circles, which represent latent, or unobserved variables.

The four squares at the bottom of Figure 1 were used to represent the subjects' ratings of four measures of their response to the sexual encounter, their (a) recollection of their reactions at the time, (b) recollection of the guilt they felt at the time, (c) current memory of the encounter, and (d) current feelings of guilt about the encounter. The circle representing the latent variable "response to experience" is the factor of the four manifest scores, as indicated by the arrows from the latent factor to the manifest variables. The factor represents what the four manifest variables have in common. The values of these arrows (the factor loadings) represent the portion of the variance of each manifest variable that is accounted for by the latent variable, that is, the regression of the manifest variable on the factor. The values of the spans on each of the four manifest variables indicate the amount of the variance of the variable that is not accounted for the by the latent variable--the unique variance of each variable. The arrows from the eight squares at the top of the figure to the latent variable indicate that each of those manifest variables are used to predict the latent variable. The values of these arrows are partial regression weights, and thus represent the predictive value of that manifest independent variable while holding all of the other independent variables constant. The value of the span on the latent variable represents the portion of its variance not accounted for by any of the predictor variables. The span on each of the eight predictor variables is set at 1, since there are no variables predicting these variables and thus all of their variance is unaccounted for by the model.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The eight predictor variables were chosen to represent 5 hypothesized sources of the variance of the subjects' responses. The first represents the amount of pressure that was exerted on the subject by the other child to gain his or her cooperation. The second is the difference in the age of the two children, obtained by subtracting the subject's age from the other child's age. The next variable represents, through effect coding, whether the activity was heterosexual or homosexual, with homosexual encounters being the comparison experience. The next two variables represent, through effect coding, three types of sexual experiences: kissing and exposing, fondling, and oral or genital intercourse. Intercourse is the comparison experience, consequently the first of the two variables represents the difference between kissing and intercourse, and the second represents the difference between fondling and intercourse. The last three variables represent, again through effect coding, four categories of relationship between the two children: strangers, acquaintances, friends, and relatives. Relatives is the comparison relation, with the three variables representing the difference between relatives and strangers, acquaintances, and friends respectively.

The fit of any model can be measured by two indicators, the ratio between the Chi square statistic (X2) and the degrees of freedom (DF), and the Goodness of Fit (GOF). The value of the predictors as a group is tested by removing them all from the model (setting the value of their arrows to the latent variable at zero). If an insignificant amount of GOF is lost, or if there is little change in the X2 ratio, then it must be assumed that the predictors as a whole have no effect on the subjects' response. The value of each predictor is tested by removing it while keeping the others in the model and noting the change in GOF and X2 (in the case of the effect-coded predictors, all that represent a certain characteristic are removed simultaneously). While the change in GOF is viewed more subjectively, the change in X2 can be compared with the change in DF in a X2 table, at a chosen degree of probability. For instance the X2 table indicates that for 2 DF, the X2 at the .01 level is 9.2. Consequently, an increase of more than 9.2 X2 in the face of an increase of 2 DF would be a significant change at the .01 level.

Insert Table 3 about here

As can be seen from Table 3, removing all the predictors caused a significant increase ($p < .001$) in the X2 ratio and decline in the GOF. Removing type of sexual act and age difference caused minor changes in the X2 ratio and GOF, while removing coercion, whether the act was homosexual or heterosexual, and the type of relation caused a significant decline in the GOF and X2 ratio ($p < .001$). Higher levels of coercion resulted in a more negative reaction, and homosexual encounters resulted in a more negative reaction than heterosexual encounters. Figure 2 is a graphic representation of the differences between the reactions according to the relationship of the subject to the other child. The few encounters with a stranger were viewed most negatively, with encounters with a friend being viewed more positively than those with an acquaintance or relative, which resulted in a similar reaction.

Insert Figure 2 about here

In order to further investigate the effects of high levels of coercion, the reactions of (a) all subjects who rated the pressure placed on them by the other child as a 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale (1=no pressure, 7=extreme pressure), (b) a random sample of those who did not experience high levels of coercion, and (c) all other subjects who had experienced a sexual encounter with an adult while they were a child, were compared using MANOVA. Subjects who had both an encounter with another child and an adult were excluded from this portion of the analysis. As can be seen in Table 4, the responses of those coerced by another child were similar to those having a sexual encounter with an adult ($F=.8$, ns), while those exu59iencing lower levels of coercion by another child responded significantly more positively than those having an encounter with an adult ($F=42.4$, $p<.001$).

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

After comparing the percent of adults who remembered a sexual encounter with the number of children who reported a sexual encounter Kinsey et al. (1953) concluded that adults remember only a fraction of their sexual experiences as children. As such, the 42% of subjects in this study who remembered a childhood sexual encounter probably do not represent all who had one, but they do represent those whose experience was meaningful enough for its memory to last into adulthood. More males reported having a sexual encounter, and those who had more or closer friends were more likely to have one. Other demographic factors were not associated with a higher probability of having a childhood sexual encounter. Since most childhood sexual encounters happened with a friend, it appears that availability of other children's with whom one feels comfortable considering a sexual encounter is an important factor.

It should be noted again that the subjects were asked to detail the childhood sexual encounter that had the most meaning for them, thus not all of the experiences that the subjects had have been accounted for. The encounters that were noted generally occurred when the subject was nine years old, with a child about one half a year older. Approximately half of the encounters involved sexual hugging and kissing or looking at genitals. Most of the other encounters involved some type of fondling, with only about 10% involving some sort of intercourse. Most of the encounters reported by females and almost 90% of those recalled by males involved a heterosexual experience. While Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) noted a higher level of homosexual experiences, it may be that these subjects viewed any homosexual encounter as not as meaningful as heterosexual experiences, and thus reported the heterosexual encounter.

Response to the sexual experiences. Several characteristics were associated with more negative reactions to the childhood sexual encounters. Since LSM treats the association between each characteristic and the subject's response as a partial regression, holding constant the association between the other characteristics and the response, it can provide an accurate representation of the unique association that each characteristic has with the response. Those who experienced higher levels of coercion from the other child to gain their participation rated the encounter as more negative, as did those who had a homosexual encounter. Those involved with friends viewed it more positively than those involved with an acquaintance or relative, while the few involved with a stranger viewed the

experience most negatively. Interestingly, the the of sexual act was not associated with the subject's reaction: Those engaged in exhibitionism and kissing, fondling, or some type of intercourse rated their reactions similarly.

These results suggest that it is the atmosphere surrounding the sexual experience, and not the sexual act itself, has the greatest influence on the subject's overall response to the encounter. It is conceivable that many children's do not know enough about sexual matters to be able to classify various types of sexual acts, and thus classify everything involving acts such as kissing or anything involving the "private parts" of their bodies as sexual. On the other hand, most children are well aware of situations in which they are coerced to do something, and may tend to react in a generally negative way to these. Many types of encounters with friends may have a more positive atmosphere than those with whom the child is less familiar. The negative relation between homosexual encounter and response might be due to the child's belief that doing something "gay" is wrong, or due to changes in the subject's later response and memory as the homosexual experience took on a more negative characteristic.

The negative effects of coerced childhood sexual experiences was highlighted by showing that the responses of those children coerced by another child were similar to those of children having a sexual encounter with an adult. If the generally accepted belief that childhood sexual experiences with an adult have a negative impact on the child is true, these results may suggest that investigations into the possible negative effects of coercive sexual experiences between children may be an important addition to our understanding of child development.

In summary, this investigation has provided some updated information on the types of sexual activity engaged in by generally upper-middle class children about 10 years ago. It has also indicated that certain characteristics of the encounter are associated with more negative responses by the children. Further investigations into the effects of coercive sexual experiences between children appear to be called for.

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Table 1

Comparison of Demographic Information for
Subjects With and Without Sexual Encounters With Other Children

	with sexual experience (455, 42%)		no sexual experience (634, 58%)		
Gender					X2(1) = 6.0, p = .01
Female	258	(39%)	403	(61%)	
Male	196	(47%)	223	(53%)	
Race					
White	409	(43%)	546	(57%)	
Black	27	(39%)	42	(61%)	
Asian	10	(26%)	28	(74%)	
Other	3	(33%)	9	(67%)	
Strength of Religion in Childhood Family *	3.98	(1.74)	4.27	(1.75)	F = 7.5, p = .01
Size of Childhood Town					
Farm	7	(29%)	17	(71%)	
< 5,000	29	(35%)	55	(65%)	
5,000-25,000	104	(42%)	146	(58%)	
25,000-100,000	150	(45%)	182	(55%)	
100,000-500,000	77	(41%)	113	(59%)	
> 500,000	73	(42%)	101	(58%)	
Mother's Education					
Less than college	81	(38%)	133	(62%)	
Some college	91	(39%)	140	(61%)	
College degree	206	(46%)	246	(54%)	
Post-graduate	48	(34%)	95	(66%)	
Father's Education					
Less than college	50	(44%)	64	(56%)	
Some college	44	(40%)	67	(60%)	
College degree	125	(52%)	116	(48%)	
Post-graduate	200	(42%)	280	(58%)	
Amount of Parental Control in Family **	3.48	(1.47)	3.41	(1.43)	
Childhood Friends					X2(3) = 7.8, p = .05
None	3	(20%)	12	(80%)	
1-2	92	(44%)	117	(56%)	
3-4	176	(38%)	290	(62%)	
> 4	157	(45%)	192	(55%)	
Had a Friend to Confide In					X2(1) = 4.5, p = .03
Yes	359	(43%)	485	(57%)	
No	65	(34%)	127	(66%)	

* 7-point scale; 1 = not religious, 7 = very religious
** 7-point scale; 1 = very strict, 7 = very permissive

Table 2

Types of Sexual Experiences, Compared by Gender
(experiences rated as most meaningful by subjects)

	Girls (n = 276)		Boys (n = 206)		
Type of Sexual Activity					X2(8) = 15.9, p = .04
Kissing and hugging	71	(26%)	47	(23%)	
Exhibiting	90	(33%)	52	(26%)	
Fondling	41	(15%)	24	(12%)	
Genital fondling	44	(16%)	49	(24%)	
Oral	11	(4%)	8	(4%)	
Attempted intercourse	8	(3%)	15	(7%)	
Intercourse	3	(1%)	7	(3%)	
Other	3	(1%)	2	(1%)	
Subject's Age	8.75	(2.4)	9.34	(2.4)	F = 6.8, p = .009
Age of Other Child	9.45	(2.9)	9.67	(2.7)	
Difference in Age (years other child older)	.69	(1.7)	.29	(1.6)	F = 6.1, p = .01
Gender Relationship					X2(1) = 13.8, p = .002
Heterosexual	193	(72%)	176	(87%)	
Homosexual	75	(28%)	27	(13%)	
Relation to Other Child					
Stranger	2	(1%)	1	(1%)	
Aquaintance	20	(8%)	19	(10%)	
Friend	212	(79%)	163	(82%)	
Relative	33	(12%)	15	(8%)	
Number of Occurrences	2.52	(1.98)	2.84	(2.2)	
median	1.62		1.93		
Who Initiated Activity					X2(2) = 87.2, p = .001
Subject	20	(9%)	89	(49%)	
Other child	198	(84%)	83	(46%)	
Third person	17	(7%)	10	(5%)	

Table 3

Strength of Association Between Predictor Variables and Subjects' Response

	X2	Df	GOF	dX2	dDF	dGOF
Full Model	190	34	.909			
effects removed from model						
All variables	357	42	.830	167	8	-139
Age difference	190	35	.908	0	1	- 1
Sexual act	192	35	.908	2	2	- 1
Hetero/Homo	248	35	.872	56	1	- 33
Relation	223	37	.876	33	3	- 35
Pressure	274	35	.871	84	1	- 38

(dX2, dDF, and dGOF signify the difference between these indices for the model with an effect removed and the initial, full model)

Table 4

Comparison of Highly Coercive and Other Sexual Encounters with Children and Sexual Encounters with an Adult

Lower Levels of Coercion vs. Children Involved with an Adult

Dependent measure	with child (n=96) mean	SD	with adult (n=63) mean	SD	F
Reaction to experience##					42.4**
Response then	5.11	1.44	2.00	1.61	153.3***
Guilt then	4.92	1.63	3.10	2.59	29.3***
Memory	4.80	1.78	2.15	1.66	88.1***
Guilt now	5.30	1.94	4.47	2.88	4.7*

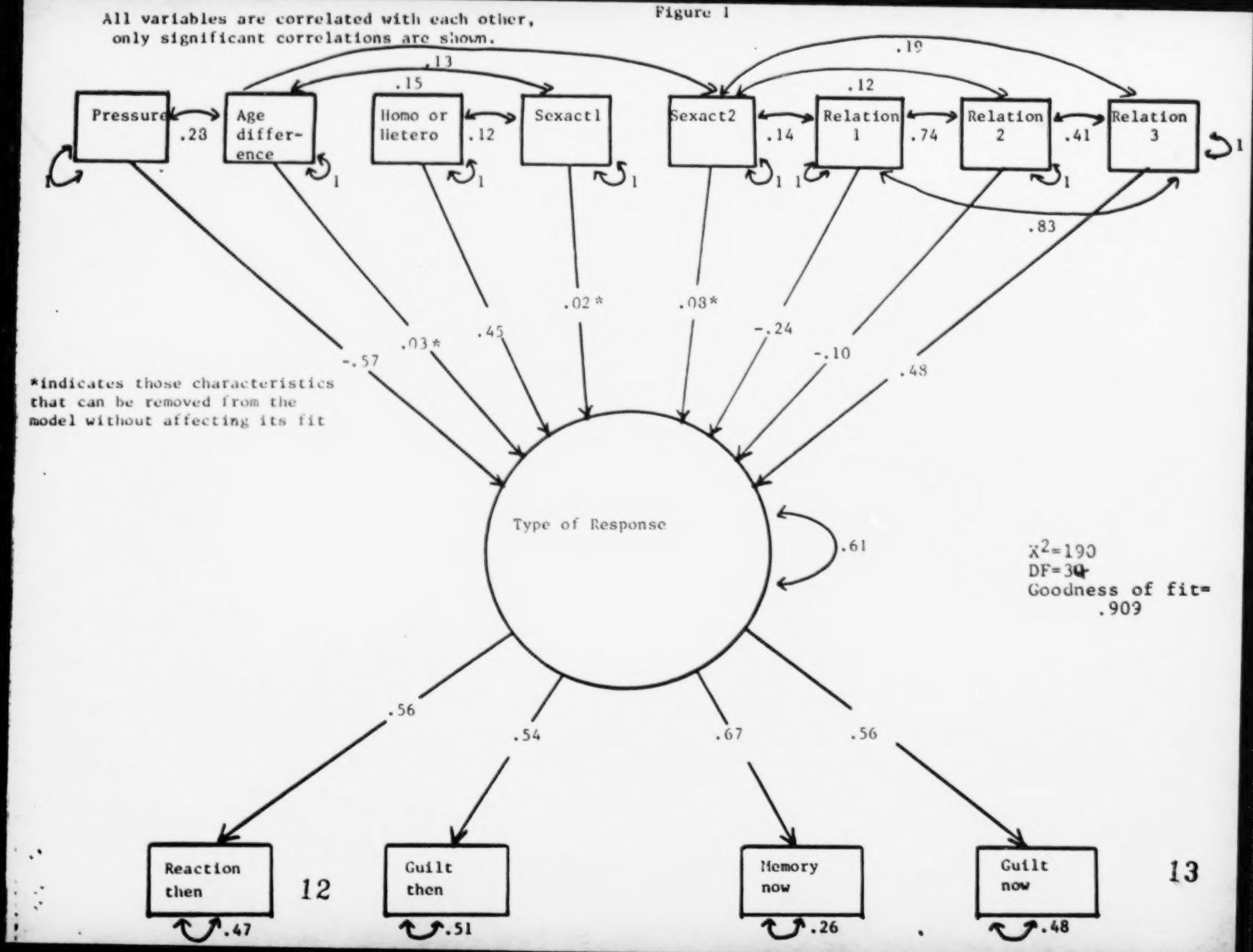
Higher Levels of Coercion vs. Children Involved with and Adult

Dependent measure	with child (n=38) mean	SD	with adult (n=63) mean	SD	F
Reaction to experience					.8
Response then	2.53	2.00	2.00	1.61	1.5
Guilt then	3.32	2.33	3.10	2.59	.3
Memory	2.74	2.11	2.15	2.88	2.4
Guilt now	4.24	2.94	4.47	2.88	.1

(## from 7-point scales: 1=most negative, most guilt
7=most positive, least guilt)

* $p < .05$
*** $p < .001$

Figure 1


All variables are correlated with each other, only significant correlations are shown.
Pressure
Age differ-ence
Homo or Hetero
Sexact1
Sexact2
Relation 1
Relation 2
Relation 3
.23
.12
.14
.74
.41
.13
.15
.19
.12
.83
.02*
.08*
.03*
.45
-.57
-.24
-.10
.48
*indicates those characteristics that can be removed from the model without affecting its fit
Type of Response
.61
X^2=190
DF=30
Goodness of fit= .909
.56
.54
.67
.56
Reaction then
Guilt then
Memory now
Guilt now
.47
.51
.26
.48

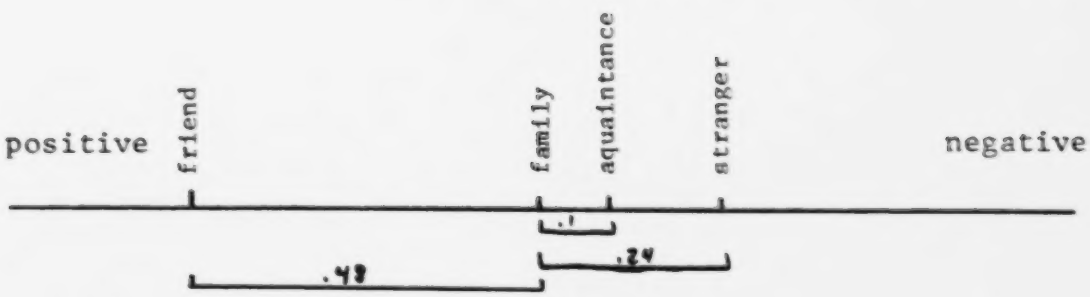

positive
friend
family
aquaintance
stranger
negative
.1
.24
.48

Figure 2